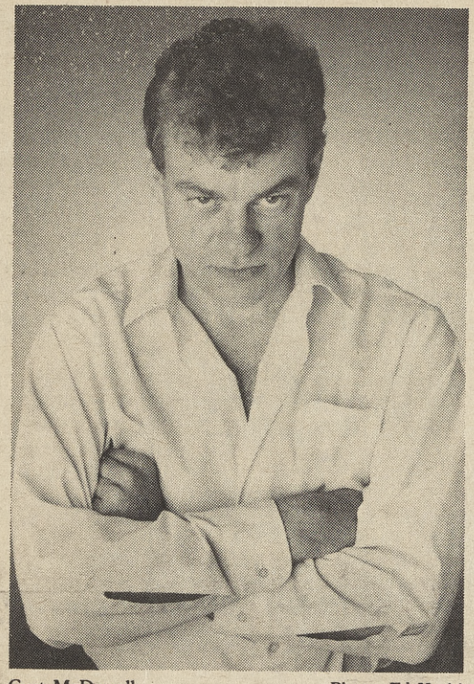
Rubbing Our Noses in Taboo



Curt McDowell Photo: Ed Kashi

By Ellen Trabilcy

Curt McDowell may be to punk noire film what Alan Watts is to philosophy. McDowell is the San Francisco filmmaker who's been realizing his sexual fantasies on celluloid (and other places) for a dozen years now. His most recently completed film, *Taboo: The Single & the LP*, is scheduled to show at the Roxie Cinema on December 11 and 12 — "the full moon and the night after," McDowell noted.

Both McDowell and Watts promulgate taboo behaviors so as to render them acceptable. To express in the media, it seems, is to legitimize, although revolution is slow and visionaries are often hungry in the meanwhile. As Watts put it, *Any evolving species must look with misgivings on those of its members who first show signs of change, and will surely regard them as dangerous or crazy.**

Taboo stars Marion Eaton and George Kuchar, together again after *Thundercrack!* which played to thousands of devotees of McDowell's wry work in dozens of midnight shows last year. *Thundercrack!* will be on the bill with *Taboo* at the two Roxie shows this month.

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McDowell calls *Taboo* a "cubistic narrative" — a story told from many angles. I was reminded of Jung's concept of circumambulation — literally, "around walking" — which is just what McDowell did with his camera, producing a rhythmic jumble of sights, sounds, and sensations.

McDowell started shooting *Taboo* five years ago and only recently was able to finance the months of post-production. He was inspired to make the film by seven pieces of graffiti he found — bits of information about the Fuqua (pronounced "Few-kwa") family — Abner (Kuchar), Dorothy (Eaton), and their daughter Mary (Melinda McDowell, the filmmaker's sister). McDowell filled in the blanks with his untiring imagination.

The result is a poem of a film, stark in its images and messages, crisp in its technique. McDowell is an extraordinary editor. His timing is ultrafinely tuned. His eye and ear pick up and translate the same primitive rhythm I've seen in his dancing body, always clad in black or black-and-white. On the coarsest thread of a story he strings pearls of images and sounds that become a hypnotic choker of a film.

The thread of *The LP* portion of *Taboo* was picked up, McDowell tells us on the sound track, in 1972. "I was spending a lot of time hanging around this men's room [he giggles], at the Maritime Museum," when he came across the first piece of graffiti. (See below.) In the next two years, in two locations, McDowell found six more pieces of the story.

The use of words, says Watts, *. . . is to point beyond themselves to a world of* life and experience *that is not mere words or even ideas.* (Emphasis mine.) Perhaps this is why the pen and its descendants — film, the microchip — are commonly respected and often revered. The melody of the processed word lingers on, unlike the poetry we all speak, which disappears the moment it appears and can affect only those who witness its brief existence. Work reproduced for dissemination commands attention; good work sustains interest.

"I kept wondering about who wrote the story," McDowell says, and so he invented a narrator.

A far cry from Nick Carraway, Fahed Martha is a young Palestinian man McDowell got to know on breezy Mission Street evenings. Fahed was 15 when McDowell started filming him in 1977. "His girlfriend Suzie was present at all the shoots," McDowell says. ". . . To me he represented heterosexual male."

My own vision of Fahed was so different that I failed to see him in that role within the film. What I did see was eager but unripe male sexuality of any age or any sexual persuasion, expressed in the swaggering style typical of swarthy men from hot parts of the world.

While Fahed is displaying his self-made tattoos, for instance, we hear McDowell inquiring about his sexual preferences and practices. McDowell is also heard coaching Fahed's reading of the graffiti. The result of intercutting documentary sequences like these with the theatrics of the Fuqua family is a continual shifting of perspective—important, says McDowell, "so that you're always aware it's a film."

The family's story is accompanied by a Greek chorus of maxims McDowell took from a book he found in a roadside restaurant in Wyoming— "one of those books that's supposed to brighten the day for old people," he says. The chorus is chanted by one female voice and one male voice (Eaton and Kuchar), which "peep through the holes of each other so that they get to understand what's happening," McDowell says.

Here are the seven pieces of graffiti (*in italics*):

Abner L. Fuqua clears his throat and I get mad and stand close to trains or cut my eyebrow off.

Abner L. Fuqua is a master of menacing nuance. "I made him a tyrant who's into control," says McDowell. "That's one aspect of me." Fahed rotates, hands bound

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*All quotations of Watts are from *The Book (On the Taboo Against Knowing Who you Are).*

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behind him, in a cold shower that actually did turn cold during the shooting. "That's when I got the best footage," the filmmaker says. I shrink the first time a blade is raised to an eyebrow, reminded of Bunuel's surprise.

Dorothy is Abner's wife.

Abner's wife Dorothy is a madonna in a black merry widow corset languishing upstairs all day. The Greek chorus chants, "Without a wife, a man lives in a world without a sound." Downstairs, Abner is watching "The Honeymooners" on tv, "his only stimulation and source of information about what's going on in the world," McDowell says. In the absence of intelligible words, Ralph Kramden is only burlesque and Alice Kramden's deadpan proves that less is more, even though the commercial interrruptions tell us that more is more, buy and buy. The family, in the kitchen, plays "Let's Furnish A House." Occasionally Dorothy receives a caller in her bed.

Abner can slap hard, like Blue Magic.

Ainslie appears in soft focus as Blue Magic, and the chorus is cut to a clap track with a riveting stop-beat. McDowell and long-time collaborator Mark Ellinger wrote the film's music, which Marion Eaton keeps saying should be released as an album. I agree.

Dorothy rattles pots and pans in the kitchen. I get mad and stand close to trains or cut my eyebrow off.

The chorus: "There is nothing holier in this life of ours than the first consciousness of love — the first flutterings of its silken wings." Dorothy's sexual encounter over, she descends to the kitchen where the family is playing "Fat Boy's Game." Abner, watching tv in the next room, becomes angry. He clears his throat, and the house shakes. He charges the kitchen and sweeps the playing board off the table. The family scatters.

Dorothy and Abner are Mary Abner's mother and father.

Mary Abner is between daddy's legs when mom whispers something into her ear that stops her cold.

One time, Mary Abner F. kicked the tv set through the wall. Abner L. Fuqua slapped her hard like Blue Magic.

"I didn't want to show her actually kicking a tv set through a wall," McDowell says. The chorus tells us, "Youth is the full spring of life, when joy is stirring in the dancing blood." Abner L. Fuqua descends upon a public toilet and pulls his daughter apart from her act of defiance up against the wall, below the graffiti.

Abner's face is a yard long from heartbreak and trouble.

This is the only piece of the story that was found in two places. "When I first saw it [at the Maritime Museum], it said only, 'Abner's face is a ya--.' He [?] didn't get to finish it, I guess. So for two years I didn't know the end — can you imagine? And then I found it again, in the men's room in the park at Bryant and 16th Street, complete. So I felt I was supposed to make this story."

The constant awareness of death, writes Watts, *shows the world to be as flowing and diaphanous as the filmy patterns of blue smoke in the air — that there is really nothing to clutch and no one to clutch it.*

The LP portion of the film, the Fuqua story, is a McDowellian celebration of life. *The Single* portion is five minutes of footage McDowell shot in 1969 — part of his first-ever film — of an autopsy on an unclaimed corpse. "Death is not a foe but an inevitable adventure," chants the chorus. When he flubs the line, Kuchar's giggling provides relief from the intensity of the visuals. "A grave is such a quiet place," we hear, and the story ends.

The present is the only thing that has no end, Watts quotes the biophysicist Erwin Schrodinger.

"A friend said he's seen other pieces [of the story] around, but I haven't," says McDowell.

Watts explains that *to say that certain events are causally* [not "casually"] *connected is only a clumsy way of saying that they are features of the same event, like the head and tail of the cat.*

During the party following the opening of *Taboo* a few of us went up to the roof to breathe and watch the sky. McDowell was holding his breath as he watched his black-and-white cat Goldie teeter without benefit of tail down a severely sloping portion of the roof when Carmen Vigil, founder of The Cinematheque and long-time supporter of McDowell's art, said the new film reminded him of Maya Deren's work. McDowell demurred immediately. Goldie skidded upright to the bottom of the slope.

McDowell contemplated the tar and sighed. "I just wish I knew what this film means," he said, yet again.

Wonder, says Watts, *and its expression in poetry and the arts, are among the most important things which seem to distinguish [humans] from other animals, and intelligent and sensitive people from morons.* ■

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